Introduction: Seven types of continuity in discourse

Tottie, Gunnel

Abstract: This issue of Language Variation and Change brings together seven articles from four continents, North and South America, Europe, and Australia, dealing with Québec French, Brazilian Portuguese, British and Australian English, respectively. Although the geographical spread is great, the articles have in common a focus on how various discourse strategies and devices (punctors, pragmatic expressions, extension particles) maintain coherence or continuity in spoken discourse, and all subscribe to the importance of a rigorous quantitative methodology. They thus bear testimony to the important development in linguistics in recent years that regards discourse processes found mainly in unedited oral speech as crucial data offering a key to the functioning of human language (Ducrot, 1980; Roulet et al., 1985; Schegloff et al., 1977; Schiffrin, 1987; Stenström, 1990)

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Introduction: Seven types of continuity in discourse

GUNNEL TOTTIE
University of Zürich

This issue of *Language Variation and Change* brings together seven articles from four continents, North and South America, Europe, and Australia, dealing with Québec French, Brazilian Portuguese, British and Australian English, respectively. Although the geographical spread is great, the articles have in common a focus on how various discourse strategies and devices (punctors, pragmatic expressions, extension particles) maintain coherence or continuity in spoken discourse, and all subscribe to the importance of a rigorous quantitative methodology. They thus bear testimony to the important development in linguistics in recent years that regards discourse processes found mainly in unedited oral speech as crucial data offering a key to the functioning of human language (Ducrot, 1980; Roulet et al., 1985; Schegloff et al., 1977; Schiffrin, 1987; Stenström, 1990).

The articles in this issue are all corpus-based, drawing on two corpora of spoken Montréal French (Sankoff & Sankoff, 1973; Thibault & Vincent, 1990), the London–Lund Corpus (Svartvik, 1990), the Censo da Variação Linguística no Rio de Janeiro (1986), and the Sydney Sociolinguistic Survey (Horvath, 1985). All the corpora are drawn from spoken language, but whereas the Québec, Brazilian, and Australian corpora were based on interviews designed to elicit phenomena of sociolinguistic variation, the British corpus was compiled to elucidate differences between spoken and written English and was based on recordings of spontaneous conversation among a socially homogeneous sample of speakers. None of the corpora were compiled with the primary intent of studying such discourse phenomena as are treated here; the interesting thing is that these phenomena were found to be all-pervasive in all of the corpora and deserving of close study.

As is well known, the question of carrying over the variationist paradigm from phonology to the study of other levels of language has been much discussed; the choice of different morphological or syntactic variants may entail differences in meaning and consequent difficulties in upholding the principle of accountability. In the study of discourse phenomena, the difficulties are even greater, and a number of pragmaticists, conversational analysts, rhetoricians, and even sociolinguists have contended that quantification of discourse analytic data may lead to vacuity. In this volume, however, the contributors all firmly subscribe to the value of quantitative study of discourse data and demonstrate, through a variety of innovative analyses and striking results, the viability of the approach.

A common focus of several of the articles in this issue is interaction between participants in dialogue. Laforest, Dubois and Horvath, and Silva and Macedo deal especially with interaction between interviewer and interviewee in sociolinguistic interviews, but there can be no doubt that their results carry over to other contexts as well. Laforest demonstrates how the amount of speaker contribution regulates backchannelling by the current non-speaker, and Silva and Macedo show how, in the absence of backchannelling, speakers will significantly increase their use of discourse particles serving as feedback requests to ensure listener attention and support.

Dubois and Horvath demonstrate the crucial importance of questioning behavior for the type of response elicited from informants. Their study thus also constitutes a contribution to the methodology of elicitation of linguistic data from informants (cf. Quirk & Svartvik, 1966). Moreover, their results are pertinent to the study of cross-cultural communication, showing as they do how interaction and response styles vary between interviewers and informants from different ethnic groups, in this case Anglos, Italians, and Greeks in Sydney. Silva and Macedo also deal with cross-cultural communication in that they warn against the assumption that individual discourse particles can be used with the same discourse function in different languages and point to the dangers of miscommunication in the use of particles.

Another type of interaction which has also been called cross-cultural (cf. Tannen 1990), viz that between women and men, is the focus of Erman's study of the use of "pragmatic expressions" (*you know*, *you see*, and *I mean*). On the basis of a carefully constructed, empirically based model, Erman is able to show real differences between gender-specific uses of pragmatic expressions and thus to highlight gender-specific behavior in general. The empirical work now being carried out in the area of gender studies will hopefully supersede much of the impressionistic, introspective, and often misleading speculation characteristic of early work on gender differences in language.

Silva and Macedo present pioneering work identifying discourse particles in Brazilian Portuguese, a previously uncharted area. It is striking but perhaps hardly surprising that the "etymology" of discourse particles across languages shows great similarities: particular semantic classes of items tend to be borrowed for the same discourse tasks: cf., e.g., the use of *well*, *bien*, *bon*, *bom* in utterance-initial position (Ducrot 1980; Schiffrin, 1987; Vicher & Sankoff, 1989); the use of *you know*, *tsé*, and *sabe* in English (Erman, 1987, 1992), French (Vincent & Sankoff, 1992), and Portuguese; negative questions as requests for backchannels; and, at least in French and English, similar origins of extension particles (Dines, 1980, Dubois, 1992).

The studies of discourse elements in this issue of *Language Variation and Change* amply document their use by different social groups, be they distinguished by age, gender, or social status. Many of them also go beyond the behavior of speakers in specific social situations or having particular social characteristics. The ordering, or "syntax," of discourse elements is highlighted

in several studies: thus the relationships within the sequence connector-quantifier-generic-comparative play a major role in Dubois' study of extension particles, Vincent and Sankoff show the distribution of punctors in terms of their role in discourse, and similarly, in Vincent's study the sequencing of exemplifying and exemplified elements plays a crucial part. The interdependence of question/response discourse types studied by Dubois and Horvath and by Silva and Macedo show the preferred sequencing of the particle type *né* and backchannelling.

The articles in this issue, though all grounded in variation theory, bring to bear a number of viewpoints on discourse analysis: conversational interaction, pragmatics, speech-act theory, as well as contemporary rhetoric (Vincent, Laforest), quantifier semantics (Dubois), prosodic analysis (Vincent & Sankoff), and interactional sociology (Dubois & Horvath, Erman).

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